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Alexis Barkley Pierce
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**The Thesis Committee for Alexis Barkley Pierce
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Women and Nail Art: A Descriptive Case Study

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Briley Rasmussen, Supervisor

Christopher Adejumo

Women and Nail Art: A Descriptive Case Study

by

Alexis Barkley Pierce

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Dedication

To my friends, family, and faculty at The University of Texas.

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I would like to acknowledge several people that helped me through graduate school. First, my Ma for supporting and encouraging me to pursue my dreams. Next, my friends for commiserating and laughing with me through this entire process. And finally to Dr. Rasmussen and Dr. Adejumo for all of their help.

Abstract

Women and Nail Art: A Descriptive Case Study

Alexis Pierce, M.A.

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Supervisor: Briley Rasmussen

The purpose of this study is to investigate why some millennial women in Austin, Texas wear nail art. This descriptive case study used content analysis to analyze interview transcriptions from three female participants who either wear nail art or paint nail art. Text from the interviews was coded and categorized into three themes: expression, bonding, and social media. Each theme reflects how participants responded to the interview questions.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

We live in a world where some women display intricate artwork on their fingertips. One can spy nail art virtually anywhere--at the gym, on the bus, or even at the supermarket. Fingernails serve as tiny canvases, bringing art to the public outside of traditional spaces such as galleries or museums. It begs the question(s): what are some of the motivations to adorn one's nails? What are some of the personal meanings behind the designs and colors chosen? What is the function of countless websites, blogs, and videos dedicated to nail art and nail art tutorials?

For this research project, I wanted to find the answers to the above-mentioned questions. To accomplish this endeavor, I interviewed three women who either wear nail art or are practicing nail artists. I examined these interviews and identified patterns that emerged from each participant's responses, ultimately discovering three prominent themes: expression, bonding, and social media. Through this research, I uncovered some of the motivations to create and consume nail art of a select group of women who participated in this study.

Central Research Question

What motivates some millennial women in Austin, Texas to create and consume nail art?

Problem Statement

The purpose of this study was to investigate the motivations of a select group of millennial women in Austin, Texas to create and wear nail art. Nail art has become an increasingly popular trend among women in part due to social media platforms like

Instagram, Twitter, and Pinterest. Much like makeup and fashion, nail art falls into the category of visual culture and must be interpreted and critically examined to better understand its significance. The art education classroom is the perfect environment for visual culture to be discussed and displayed; it adds relevance to the curriculum and prompts students to contemplate the definition of ‘art’ itself.

Personal Motivations for Research

My mother tells me that I have been a nail biter since birth. I image myself as a chubby baby furiously gnawing my fingers with slobbery gums, then with gapped toddler-teeth, and finally with adult teeth forcibly straightened by wires and rubber bands. I chewed when I was nervous, bored, or angry. I never paid much attention to the state of my nails until I became a teenager. Like my weight and my skin, I suddenly became unbearably self-conscious about the state of my mangled cuticles. The impetus for stopping my nasty habit? Nail art. I wanted my nails to match the models I saw in television and magazines, and with the advent of internet forums I was privy to thousands of nail art tutorials and how-to guides. I spent an inordinate amount of time during my adolescence learning how to mix nail polish colors and painting tiny little flowers on my nails.

As I began to seriously think about the purposes of art education, the idea of investigating visual culture with students appealed to me because I believe that students should be aware and critical of the images they see. As nail art continues to surge in popularity, I think attention should be given to the ways nail art can be used as both a creative outlet and form of expression. A closer examination of nail art and the ways

women stylize their nails will enable individuals to become more critically aware of ever-shifting trends/influences. Additionally, nail art encompasses a wide variety of styles and designs; this broad scope of images can lend itself to in-depth discussions using art vocabulary to explore aesthetics, meaning making, and artistic expression. Nail art could also be a component to an art lesson for students to categorize nail art into various styles such as geometric, organic, or symbols.

Professional Motivations for Research

As art educators, it is imperative that we incorporate contemporary popular culture into the art classroom. Not only does visual culture add relevancy to the curriculum, it also equips students with the ability to critically examine the ideas presented through popular culture. Duncum (2002) describes visual culture art education as “a broadened cannon offering a very inclusive list of images and artefacts, a focus on how we look at images and artefacts and the conditions under which we look, the study of images within their context as part of social practice” (p. 17). I want to utilize this approach in the future, so this study serves as a start in understanding a specific form of visual culture.

Furthermore, in a world where we are influenced by the images around us, it is important that students are able to interpret the meanings behind images. Nail art is a form of visual culture that is prevalent in magazines, online platforms, and in real life. In fact, nail art is one of the top five most tagged items on both Pinterest and Instagram (UCLA Labor Center, 2018). Using the visual culture paradigm, an investigation of nail art can illuminate the reasons women wear nail art. Teaching critical inquiry through

visual culture allows relevant and popular images to be critically examined; in doing so, students will be able to discern fact from opinion and gain a deeper understanding of why/how images are presented to them. By personally bettering my understanding of visual culture, it will provide me the opportunity to contribute to the field of art education by sharing my expertise with other teachers who may be hesitant to incorporate it into their lesson plans.

Definition of Terms

Instagram: A social networking website where people share photos and videos.

Cuticle: Thin, colorless layers of skin cells that stick to the nail plate.

Manicure: A beauty treatment where nails are trimmed, shaped, filed, and polished.

Nail Art: A creative way to decorate and enhance nails; artwork done on both fingernails and toenails.

Nail Bed: The layer of skin beneath the nail plate that nourishes the nail plate.

Nail Plate: Visible part of the nail that is made of keratin (this is where nail polishes are applied).

Full Set: Also known as an artificial set, it is when solar powder and liquid is applied to nails to extend nail length.

Nail Polish: Also known as lacquer, it is applied to the nail plate, using thin layers, and left to air dry between coats.

Gel Polish: A long-lasting variety of nail polish that is cured under an ultraviolet lamp or ultraviolet LED.

Dip Powder: This technique colors your nails with a super-pigmented powder.

Free Edge: The part of the nail plate grows out above the tip of your finger.

Visual Culture: An interdisciplinary field which studies the social construction of visual experience.

Research Method

This study utilized a descriptive case study framework. Descriptive case studies are generally used as a way to provide a rich description of the phenomenon being studied (Yin, 2003). The main goal of a descriptive case study is to assess a sample in detail and in depth, seeking to reveal patterns and connections in order to advance theory development. Per Ruthanne Tobin (2010) in *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, “A descriptive case study distinguishes itself from other types of case studies by its preoccupation with articulating a descriptive theory. In so doing, robust concepts emerge, conflate, and expand to inform, confirm, refute, and further shape a priori theories” (p. 289). This descriptive case study does not aim to generalize or test a theory; rather, this study illustrated why some millennial women in Austin, Texas elect to adorn and consume nail art

Data for this descriptive case study was gathered by interviewing three women (ages 23-38) selected through convenience sampling. The interviews were transcribed coded, and emergent themes were identified.

Limitations of Study

At the time research was conducted for this study (December 2020-March 2021), the Covid-19 epidemic loomed large in the United States. Many establishments either

closed their doors completely or strictly limited occupants allowed inside under state mandates to stop the spread of Covid-19, a virus that can cause severe illness or death. Nail salons were no exception to this. My original intent was to gather field notes at a salon and directly observe a nail artist work. I also wanted to have my own nails adorned with nail art to experience the process. However, due to Covid-19, I was unable to observe a nail artist at work or have my own nails done due to health concerns. During the course of this study, there remained hope that conditions around Covid-19 would improve, allowing nail salons to fully reopen for observational research to be conducted, and for there to an increased sample size to interview. However, in the end, this did not happen. The epidemic proved to be one of the largest limitations to this study.

Likewise, the parameters of this study were limited to a small sample size of only three women between the ages of 23-38. This small sample size does not include non-binary individuals or transgender women who elect to don nail art. Additionally, this study also focused on adults over the age of eighteen years old, meaning that the views of young children and adolescents are not covered.

Finally, this study was constrained by location. All participants reside in Austin, Texas. This limitation means that the views and opinions of women outside Austin, Texas are not present.

Benefits to the Field of Art Education

This research study will benefit the field of art education because the data could be used in the art education classroom to prompt discussions on art, gender, and identity. Although beyond the scope of this study, I see opportunities for constructing future curriculum that involve explorations of important topics in art education like voice and choice, and how people use art to represent and adorn themselves. The results of this study may be beneficial for myself and other art teachers interested in constructing visual culture art lessons, as nail art is a topic that could activate student engagement by making personal connections to their lives.

Conclusion

In a world where we are bombarded by visual images, it is imperative that we critically examine what these images mean so we do not blindly accept all the messages being related. The art education classroom is an ideal place to address the way people use images. Teaching students how to decipher the codes and messages in visual culture images will enable them to critically examine the world around them. By assessing the opinions of three women, my aim is to discover why these women wear nail art. In the next chapter, literature pertinent to this study is detailed.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter discusses literature that is pertinent to this study. The areas of study that informed this research are visual culture, feminist research, histories of manicure, nail art, body adornment, and social media. The first section on visual culture looks at the importance of examining the images that bombard us on a daily basis and how nail art falls under the umbrella of visual culture. Visual culture includes images and text not under the fine art canon, and instead of dismissing these images, this section details why it is prudent for art educators to incorporate it into their curriculums. The second section on feminist research examines visual culture through a lens of feminist theory and provides reasons why it should be incorporated in the art education classroom. The third section looks at the history of nail care and what manicured hands have represented in the past and in contemporary society. This section also details the way manicures have reflected the beauty and aesthetic trends of each era and how manicures from each generation and select cultures play a significant role in personal and cultural expression. The fourth section examines the history of nail art and the current styles, detailing how it is different from a basic manicure. Nail art casts a wide net and encompasses many designs and appliques, and this section aims to inform the reader on some of the styles and how nail art is not only featured in salons, but also displayed in museums and sold at popular trade shows. The fifth section gives an overview of the nail industry. The sixth section discusses definitions of body adornment and describes its relation to nail art. The last section is on social media and the role it plays in influencing nail art.

Visual Culture Studies

The study of visual culture is interdisciplinary and a pervasive force in all aspects of modern-day society. Visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999) states that, “the human experience is now more visual and visualized than ever before”, and that “visual culture is not a just part of our everyday lives, it is our everyday lives” (p. 315).

Likewise, art educator Duncum describes visual culture as “the wide range of meanings people make of images, as they not only accept preferred meanings but also resist and negotiate meaning. It involves understanding images in terms of how they are slipped into people’s daily rituals” (2002, p. 6). However, visual culture cannot simply be reduced to these descriptions. As a relatively new field, visual culture studies is still finding its way in the world of the fine arts. Homer (1998) described visual culture as an amorphous medium that cannot be categorized as art history, fine art, or social studies.

The amorphous nature of visual culture makes it a complex topic of study. This complexity is illustrated in Brent Wilson’s (2003) article, “Of Diagrams and Rhizomes: Visual Culture, Contemporary Art, and the Impossibility of Mapping the Content of Art Education.” The vastness of visual culture can make it difficult to incorporate into the art education curriculum. Wilson (2003) offers four options as ways to handle this complexity. His first option is to ignore its inclusion completely. Some art educators find visual culture to be the “enemy of high art” (p. 224) and should not be incorporated into the curriculum. Wilson’s (2003) second option is to add a few aspects of visual culture into the already existing curricula, having a balance between fine art and regular images.

The third option is to make art education completely exploratory with a lack of structure. Wilson's (2003) fourth suggestion is to shift the location of teaching from the art classroom to the space between schools and "the realms of contemporary art and popular visual culture—a parasite along the main site" (p. 225). Here students would construct their own interests based on the content of their art classes and their visual culture interest (Wilson, 2003).

Conversely, another method of including visual culture into the classroom is suggested by Tavin (2003) in "Wrestling with Angels, Searching for Ghosts: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Visual Culture." Tavin suggests that educators can begin to include visual culture by sharing in the process of learning (2003). Educators and students answer questions in a collaborative effort to evaluate the way they experience visual culture. Tavin (2003) proposes asking questions such as, "What images are we currently exposed to in visual culture?" and "What do we learn from these images?" (p. 208). These questions prompt students to focus on their experiences with visual culture and opens a forum among the students.

Moreover, visual culture can be used to critically examine pop culture, politics, community, and identity. Barrett (2003) uses art criticism skills and strategies to examine and understand the visual culture of our everyday lives. Objects like t-shirts, cereal boxes, and teddy bears carry meaning beyond surface level, with connotations and denotations that viewers, even young children (with guidance) can interpret. Barrett states: "It is immensely important that we interpret the images and designed objects with which we live. Images and objects present opinions as if they were truth, reinforce attitudes, and

confirm or deny beliefs and values” (2003, p. 12). As the findings in this study show, nail art showcases the values and opinions of the three participants. The images on their nails, like other forms of visual culture, need to be interpreted to fully understand what they mean or represent.

Additionally, Tavin (2003) asserts that visual culture examines and challenges messages presented through images. Nail art is a staple of visual culture that most people have seen whether in real life, onscreen, or in magazines. Perhaps onlookers did not have the term ‘nail art’ to describe the elaborate images on women’s nails they spied on the bus or at the supermarket; perhaps they did not understand why someone would apply such elaborate designs to their nails. The purpose of this study was to provide context for these possible onlookers. The art education classroom is an ideal space to discuss nail art because it allows for an open forum to discuss the implications and intentions connected to reflect human ideals, femininity, and body adornment.

According to Freedman (1994), the future of art education will center on teaching visual culture and interpreting social issues. Examining visual culture reveals the ideologies placed on viewers by society, and art educators can investigate popular culture to engage students in recognizing embedded and hidden texts in visual culture. Through visual culture, art educators can encourage students to question the ideas that everyday images present. Since nail art is an example of visual culture that encompasses a wide variety of images, it serves as a multifaceted topic for educators to utilize in their lessons.

Feminist Research

Visual culture in the art classroom can be explored through feminist theory. Bailey (2012) describes feminist research as a methodology that questions traditional research theories by giving visibility to marginalized groups in order to reduce inequities. Keifer-Boyd (2010) states that “to interpret visual culture, it is important to look at conditions for the cultural artifact’s production in relation to...gender-role expectations and specific visual codes of the time” (p. 9). Feminist critiques of visual culture would include discussing gender inequities, gender roles, and analyzing images that may be oppressive to women on magazines, album covers, or commercials. Keifer-Boyd and Smith-Shank (2017) assert that, “Gendered visual culture surrounds us and influences our perceptions of reality. Whether we pay attention or not, we learn from the visual experiences of our everyday lives. The dialogue between image and text provides multifaceted opportunities for making meaning” (p. 19). Addressing beauty standards presented through visual culture can raise awareness about the oppressive ideals of gender that are pervasive in society.

Nail art is a highly gendered mode of expression. While some men and nonbinary individuals may wear nail art, it is largely worn by cisgender women. Arguably, wearing nail art can be seen as trying to conform to beauty ideals or standards. Wolf (1991) contends that the pursuit of obtaining and pursuing beauty ideals, “leeches money and leisure and confidence” (p. 53) from women. On the other hand, sociologist Paula Black (2002) argues that women who pursue beauty ideals through cosmetics or fashion do so because it offers “pleasure, escapism, and a means of coping” (p. 16). Looking at nail art

through a feminist lens provides differing opinions as to why women decide to spend money, time, and effort on adorning their nails with art. The data from this research sought to illuminate these opinions and provided reasons why a select group of women wear nail art.

Manicure

The predecessor for elaborate nail art is the standard manicure. The distinction between the two is important to make, as both have their own unique histories and representations. The practice of manicuring fingernails itself is ancient. There is evidence that as far back as 4,000 years ago, manicures took place in southern Babylonia, and manicure instruments have been found in Egypt's royal tombs alongside mummies with henna-dyed fingertips (Forde, 2005). But what exactly does a manicure entail? A manicure consists of filing and shaping fingernails, pushing and clipping the cuticles, and the optional application of any nail lacquer or polish. This grooming practice has different variations, of course, depending on the respective era and culture. The following section will detail prior practices and examine how they compare to contemporary views of a manicure.

Wilson (2017) writes that before nail polishes existed, women used various materials to dye their nails; in China during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 A.D.), nobles mixed together egg whites, wax, and vegetable dye to tint their nails. In the 18th century, Turkish women dyed their nails a rose-color with the help of henna (Valenti, 2014). The color of one's manicure was an important marker of status. For example, in 11th century

China, only royalty were permitted to color their nails silver or gold; if commoners were found wearing these noble colors, they were punished (Wilson, 2017). Certain colors continue to infer statuses in the 21st century, although there are no regulations prohibiting people from wearing certain colors.

Like colors, the shape of a manicure reflects ever-changing trends throughout generations. In 1878, Mary E. Cobb opened the first nail salon in the United States on West 23rd Street in New York. Cobb proclaimed herself to be the “originator of the manicure art in America” (Shapiro, 2014) and her business in New York was so successful that she eventually opened salons in Chicago, Illinois and Saratoga Springs, New York. Cobb is credited for creating the emery board and marketing a line of nail-care products such as Zantic, a bleach that fades nail stains, and Cosmetic Cherri-Lip, a nail tint that was a rosy color (Shapiro, 2014). During Mary E. Cobb’s time, the shape of manicures at that time were always well-rounded; this shape denoted leisure and wealth. Well-rounded nails suggested that a woman was wealthy because her nails did not show signs of manual labor like being uneven or chipped. This rounded shape remained the popular trend until the 1930s, when women in the United States ditched the rounded manicure for nails mimicking Joan Crawford’s, which were filed to points like the stiletto shape (Figure 1) and painted red. By 1950, long and almond-shaped nails reigned supreme, with stars like Lucille Ball and Elizabeth Taylor spurring this trend. Between 1960 and 1980, women in the United States favored “squoval” shaped nails (Figure 1). Like the names suggest, the “squoval” shape is a cross between an oval and square. Since

the 1990s, manicure shapes have been varied without a specific style being the most popular (Wilson, 2017).

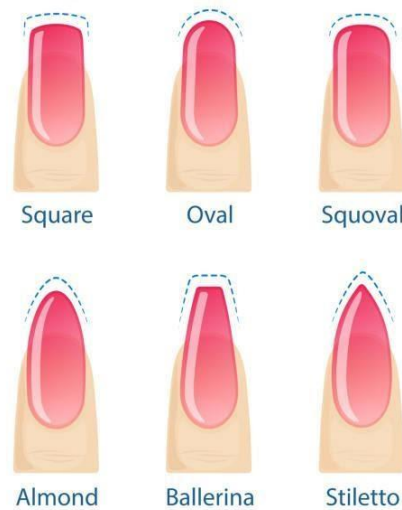


Figure 1: Chart of different nail shapes. (Credit to iStock by Getty Images.)

Throughout history manicured nails have been associated with notions of female beauty. An article published in 18th century England entitled “Delights for the Ingenius” described the ideal hand as being “white, somewhat long and plump...fingers ending pyramid-wise...and nails of mother of pearl turned Oval-wise” (Anonymous, 1711, p. 153). If a woman’s hand were of darker complexion or if her nails were not filed to a specific shape, she would not possess the ideal traits described in this article. Without these ideal features, it can be argued that this would lower a woman’s desirability and femininity. She would be perceived as less beautiful if her nails did not perfectly exemplify these traits. Hence, the condition and shape of female’s nails needed to meet certain standards for them to be perceived as beautiful. In contemporary United States, a manicured hand is still positively equated with ideals of beauty and femininity, with

Americans spending \$7.47 billion on professional nail treatments as of 2012 (Shapiro, 2014). It is important to note that while the first nail salon in the United States was opened by Mary Cobb, a white woman, the majority of nail salons today are owned and operated by women of east Asian descent (Inside Business, 2010).

Looking at popular beauty trends seen in various times and geographical locations, we can see what trends people considered to be aesthetically pleasing. The manicure has reflected these trends across various cultures and societies. In 1800s Britain, nails buffed and tinted with red oil were the standard. In France during the 1920s the “Moon Manicure” became popular with flappers, where they painted only the middle of the nail with enamel, leaving the tips and cuticles bare resulting in a crescent shape. In 1940s America, red nails became high fashion. Years later in 1976, the French manicure debuted on Paris runways ushering in a new perspective of beauty (Shapiro, 2014). Black nails became popular during the 1990s in both the United Kingdom and the United States to represent the grunge aesthetic, and in 1994 the dark red-black color Uma Thurman wore in Quentin Tarantino’s neo noir crime film *Pulp Fiction*—Chanel’s Rouge Noir—became so popular that it immediately sold out once it became available to the public (Fetto, 2021). Looking at these different manicures, one can differentiate what popular aesthetic trend was prominent during that time.

Beyond aesthetic trends, manicures also reflect hygiene and health. The status of nails becoming entwined with hygiene gained prominence during the second half of the 19th century. Touted as hygienic, manicures set the standard of personal cleanliness, with

both men and women making sure their nails were buffed, trimmed, and free of any dirt beneath the tips. Not much has changed in the 21st century regarding this belief; according to the website Trieu Nails, a salon in London by the same name, “unevenly shaped nails, untidy cuticles, and ingrown nails are unhealthy and bad for your image” (Trieu Nails, 2018, para. 17). The idea that manicured nails are a reflection of health and hygiene can be seen as a marketing statement. By stating this, Trieu Nails is offering health and hygiene through their manicure services. However, statistics also show that women are concerned with the healthy appearance of their nails. As of 2018, 85% to 90% of women worldwide use nail care products that report to improve the appearance of one’s nails (Goldstein Research, 2018). However, it should be noted that there is little evidence to suggest that these claims actually improve nail quality (Haneke, 2006) but this illustrates that marketing for nail hygiene and health influences women’s decisions.

A standard manicure ensures that your hands appear clean and tidy, and while people in the Victorian era may not have had the science to support this, it is clear today that clean, properly manicured nails are needed to combat the spread of germs, viruses, and infections. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) recommends that nails be filed short and washed frequently with soap and water (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). Additionally, the popular website WebMD, which is known for providing information on health conditions in a digestible manner, even has an article titled “A Dozen Tips for More Beautiful Nails.” In this article, Bouchez (2006) gathered the opinions of three top dermatologist to list the ways necessary for beautiful nails. The

article recommends biotin supplements and moisturizing the nailbed and cuticles, while also warning against nail hardeners since they are no clinical studies to support that they actually harden the nail. studied clinically and cannot be backed up by science. Given that this article is featured on WedMD, it further supports the idea that health, beauty, and hygiene are connected to one's nails.

While this case study focused on nail art, all participants mentioned manicures during their interviews. Participants made a distinction from what manicures meant to them in comparison to nail art. Existing literature on manicures encompasses the history of the process, entrepreneurs in the field, and reasons why both men and women get manicures (whether it be for beauty or health). The data of this study illuminated the differences between manicures and nail art and examined the opinions of the participants.

Nail Art

In contrast to the manicure, nail art is a creative way to paint, decorate and embellish the nails. It is a type of artwork that can be applied on fingernails and toenails, usually after manicures or pedicures. The first documentation of nail art can be found in U.S. salon trade journals like *Mainly Manicure* (1980) and *Nails Magazine* (1983). *Nails Magazine*, specifically, described nail art as a broadening niche not limited to “rhinestones, pearls...decals, lace...hand painting, freehand and stenciled airbrushing, marbling, snakeskins...three-dimensional art and three-dimensional molds” (Shapiro, 2014, p. 105). Like most art forms, nail art casts a wide net that encompasses many different types of adornment. To simplify matters, nail art distinguishes itself from a

regular manicure because it requires more than a minimal application of color to the nail. Nail art requires artistry and talent to apply images, texts, or designs on such tiny surfaces; this untapped resource that exhibits skill and creativity makes it worthy of consideration as visual culture to be studied in the art education classroom.

Although nail art was not formally documented until the twentieth century, it can be argued that even in the 1800s women were pushing the artistic boundaries of what would be define nail art, as evidenced by the American actress Titenia who pierced her nails with diamond-studded rings (Shapiro, 2014). This flashy display (Figure 2) went against the natural pink and clear tints her contemporaries donned at the time.

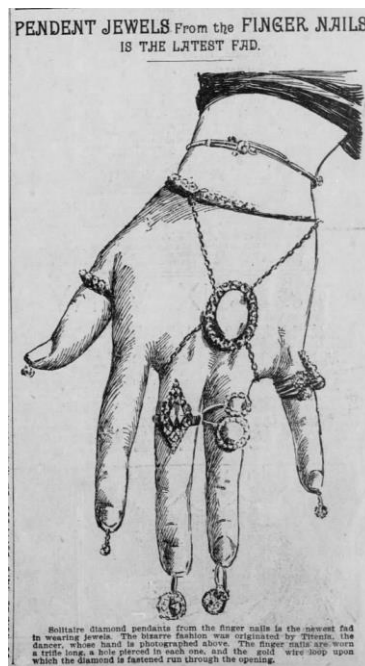


Figure 2: Pierced nails. (Credit to *The San Francisco Call*, 1898, p. 26)

Nail jewelry did not become a popular fad during Titenia's time; however, it raises the question as to why the actress would decide to go against the grain in such an extreme manner. And on a larger scale it raises the question: why do women wear nail art at all?

In the 1980s, *L.A Times* beauty columnist Paddy Calistro noted that nail art, even the kitschy cartoons and holiday designs reflected mass fashion and were a sign of the times (Calistro, 1986). As hip-hop culture came into the mainstream via popular music, fashion, and style, nail art became an expression of cultural identity (Shapiro, 2014). Shapiro (2014) writes that, "The new technique of airbrushing turned the nails into miniature works of graffiti art using more or less the same medium, thereby inscribing the urban landscape onto the body" (p. 106). Like the graffiti decorating urban scenery that voiced protests or ideas, nails became canvases that likewise expressed these messages. Instead of being landlocked to certain areas like traditional graffiti, however, nail art graffiti moved alongside the wearer, bringing the artform beyond sedentary structures locked to specific neighborhoods.

Runner Florence Griffith-Joyner arguably brought nail art into mainstream consciousness in the United States when she donned her two-inch nails painted with red, white, and blue designs during the 1988 Olympics. These colors represented Griffith Joyner's patriotism and caused quite the stir due to their length and designs (Figure 3). Patricia McLaughlin of the *Chicago Tribune* referred to Griffith-Joyner's nails as "dragon-lady fingernails" and declared that "long red nails look both dangerous and

incapacitating” (1988). Although her nails drew criticism, Griffith-Joyner refused to remove them; Griffith-Joyner even posed with her Olympic medals wearing her two-inch nails decorated with rhinestones, polka dots, and flag-inspired patterns.



Figure 3: Florence Griffith-Joyner's nails. (Photo by Tony Duffy/Allsport/Getty Images.)

Though never acknowledged in print, the backlash towards Griffith Joyner's nails was arguably because of her Blackness. According to women's studies scholar Miliann Kang, author of *The Managed Hand: Race, Gender, and the Body in Beauty Service Work*, an individual's manicure preference demonstrates embodied gender and racial difference. King (2010) writes that, "women's choices of nail styles and services reflect the social construction of beauty, which is not based on natural or biological traits but upon socially conditioned tastes that are deeply entrenched in gender, race and class

differences” (p. 98). White culture during this time reported on Griffith-Joyner’s nails with intrigue and revulsion because her nails went against their racial biases. The racial and socio-implications of Griffith-Joyner’s nails differed greatly from the white culture of that time which further spurred the commentary on and disapproval of her nails.

Moreover, the significance of nail art plays a role in society that goes beyond simple aesthetics. Nail artist Carlos Dzine Rolon (2011) states that “nail embellishment has provided a social, artistic, and historic mirror of humanity’s eternal and omnipresent desire to adorn” (p.1). Nail art mirrors aesthetic trends throughout history which makes it an important component of visual culture. Rolan (2011) goes on to assert, “nail art operates as a lens through which to view our contemporary society” (p. 1). Visual culture aims to interpret the images and cultural productions that inundate our everyday lives. numerous aspects of contemporary society.

In 2002, *Ebony* magazine acknowledged that “from rhinestones and glitter to airbrushed or polished designs, women are telling stories with their nails and people are taking notice” (p. 62). *Ebony* also conceded that the colors and designs of the “ultra-hip, ultra-fab” (p. 62) woman may not be accepted in corporate environments. However, defiant self-presentation was often the point behind flashy nail art, serving as a reflection of black urban beauty much like wigs or hair extensions (Shapiro, 2014). Nail art thus becomes a statement of culture and identity for the wearer.

There are also examples of nail art used as political statements, as seen when singer-songwriter Rihanna had a copy of the Barack Obama poster image “Hope” printed

on her nail (Figure 4) in 2009 or when Lindsay Lohan infamously had “fuck u” nail art (Figure 5) on during her 2010 court sentencing (Shapiro, 2014).



Figure 4: Rihanna's Obama nail art. (Credit to JustJared.com)



Figure 5: Lindsay Lohan's nail art. (Credit to Gawker.com)

Nail art and trends are not unique to the United States. In the early 2000s, nail art surged in Japan to reflect the contemporary fascination for the kawaii aesthetic; kawaii translated means 'cute', and through nail art, Japanese women displayed this aesthetic through images of 3-D fruits, bows, hearts, and stars (Figure 6). This nail art obsession eventually developed into an annual trade show organized by the Japan Nailist Association. Over 53,000 visitors attend over a two-day period, taking stock of the latest

cute designs. There are nail art competitions held at this show, with winners receiving trophies (Shapiro, 2014).



Figure 6: An example of kawaii nails. (Photo by Onnie A. Koski)

Nail art exhibitions are not exclusive to Japan or trade shows. Nail art also can be found in museums around the world. The Mint Museum in Charlotte, North Carolina hosted an exhibition in 2015 called *The Body Embellishment Show*. It showcased body piercings, tattoos, clothing design and nail art. The nail art portion of this exhibit featured salon installations and sculptured nail art from acclaimed nail artist Carlos Rolan (Perkins, 2015). Some of Rolan's high-fashion yet impractical nails include feathers, spirals, and antlers (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Rolan's nail art featured (Credit to Mintmuseums.org)

Similarly, the Oceanside Museum of Art in California exhibited *Tiny Canvases: The Art of Nails* that celebrated the 40th anniversary of Creative Nail Design (CND), a global leader in nail polish and nail art. From their website, the Oceanside Museum of Art states, “They [patrons] will witness how CND has consistently shaken up the concept of beauty by creating art that is not only runway-ready and wearable but also recognized as stand-alone artworks created on tiny canvases” (Oceanside Museum of Art, 2019, para. 3). These types of museum exhibits bring nail art into the world of fine/high art, showcasing the talent and mastery needed to create works of art on tiny surfaces.

Nevertheless, nail art enthusiasts around the globe do not have to attend nail art expos or visit museums to see the latest trends and styles. One can see the different iterations of decorated nails on a wide array of digital websites and sources. Through digital platforms like Instagram, Pinterest, and Tumblr, nail art designs are shared and compared with millions of users. In fact, nail art is one of the top five most tagged items

on both Pinterest and Instagram (UCLA Labor Center, 2018). Social media allows nail art enthusiasts to view thousands of images with a click of a button and to pull inspiration from them. For consumers not involved in social media, there are also forums and websites that allow internet users to scroll through nail art examples without registering an account or username. Perhaps one of the most popular and free websites for nail art is Nailpolis: Museum of Nail Art (<http://www.nailpolis.com/>), a digital platform that touts itself as “the largest community of nail art lovers.” Nailpolis.com offers weekly looks, Top 100 nail art designs, popular nail colors, and nail art competitions. Nailpolis.com was created in January 2014 and reports that they have over one thousand members as of 2020.

While nail art is popular among enthusiasts and can be found on digital platforms, conventions, and museums, research that gives voice to individuals wearing nail art is sparse. Though beyond the scope of this study, nail art could facilitate discussion on aesthetic, pattern, design, and expression in the art education classroom. There are fundamental aspects of nail art that should be part of discussion in the art classroom or other discussions about artistic practice and visual culture.

Nail Industry

According to *Nails Magazine*, the nail salon industry is one of the fastest growing sectors within the beauty industry with a market size of above \$7 billion (Nails, 2013). The massive size of the nail industry can be better understood with a visualization; Walsh (2013) reports that “for every one Starbucks retail outlet in the United States, there are

more than four nail salons” (p. 243). Nail salons can be spotted across the United States in a variety of locations such as malls or supermarkets. Walsh (2013) credits the booming nature of the nail industry to “an increase attention towards personal grooming, the sudden movement in a woman in labor market, and the arrival of low-cost, and convenient nail salons” (p. 244). In the past, going to a nail salon was considered a luxury. Now, with an ease of accessibility and lower costs, more women are able to indulge in manicures and pedicures.

The nail industry also encompasses sales of nail polish and nail lacquers. The global nail polish market size was estimated to be \$6.8 billion in 2015 (Market Analysis Report, 2017). This estimate is expected to grow in the next decade. The consumption is driven by changing lifestyles and growing awareness about beauty trends, which augment enamel demand (Market Analysis Report, 2017). The global nail industry is expected to reach \$13 billion by the year 2024 (Research and Markets, 2020). The global nail care industry continues to grow due to ever-changing fashion trends among women.

Body Adornment

Demello (2007) defines body adornment as, “The practice of physically enhancing the body by styling and decorating the hair, painting and embellishing the fingernails, wearing makeup, painting the body, wearing jewelry, and the use of clothing. Body adornments are by definition temporary” (p. xvii). Nail art is temporary in nature, thus falling in the body adornment category. While the popularity of nail art surged in the 1980s, human beings have adorned themselves since antiquity. Helman (1990) asserts

that the shape, size and adornments of the body are a way of communicating information about its owner's position in society.

Nail art communicates status to viewers. Demello (2007) states, “Because women who work with their hands cannot maintain carefully decorated, long, or even very well groomed fingernails, fingernail length and grooming are a sign of status and wealth” (p. 113). Beyond status and wealth, nail art communicates affiliations, beliefs, or style depending on the image/design represented. Langman (2008) asserts that, “In some contemporary forms of fashion and adornment, the decoration of the body itself has become a template upon which esthetic sensibilities are inscribed and through which selfhood is articulated” (p. 664). The images, texts, and designs chosen for nail art reflect some facets of a woman’s self, supporting this argument. However, body adornments like nail art may not be perceived in the way the wearer desires. Adesanya (2014) states that body adornment is “the seat of permanent conflict where the contradictory question of perception is played out between the identity image generated by the self and the image of the self as perceived by others” (p. 45). Body adornment then becomes a means of communication and mediation between people.

The research in this case study sought to understand why and how participants use nail art as a form of body adornment. The literature on body adornment explains how nail art falls into the category, but more data as to why it is worn is not plentiful. The data of this case study provided some information to contribute to the lacking amount of data.

Social Media

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations...and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (p. 61). As of 2020, popular social media sites include Instagram, Twitter, and Pinterest. Social media has played a large role in the development and widespread appeal of nail art. Suzi Weiss-Fischmann, co-founder of the OPI nail polish company, writes that, “Social media has paved the way for more exciting and innovative nail art. We used to only see nail art worn by celebrities on the red carpet; now women around the globe are using nail art as a form of artistic expression” (2019, para. 2). Social media platforms made nail art accessible for everyone and everyday wear; no longer was nail art some luxury privy only to celebrities.

Additionally, Y Pulse, a company that focuses on Millennial and Generation Z marketing, conducted a survey on 346 females ages 13-34 to highlight just how much social media impacts their beauty choices. According to Y Pulse’s data:

Fully 4 in 10 (43%) female Millennials have looked up nail art on social media in the past six months and 27% have posted a picture of their nails. They’re eager to try out different colors and designs, especially since nail art has become a key part of one’s outfit and a way to accessorize. This is especially the case for 13-17-year-old girls; 52% of teens have looked up nail art compared to 41% of 18-34-year-olds. This makes sense as teens are forming their identity and in doing so, they can easily experiment with their nails (Y Pulse, 2012, para. 2)

This connected to my study because the age range for participants was 23-38, meaning that all three women are considered Millennials. This data illustrates that women use social media to view and share nail art ideas. Y Pulse also mentions that nail

art images can garner ‘likes’ which may contribute to nail art’s popularity among young women. Dr. Steve Rose, an addiction counselor, states that, “Likes on social media are addictive because they affect your brain, similar to taking chemical substances. Likes symbolize a gain in reputation, causing you to constantly compare yourself to your peers” (Rose, 2015, para. 3). The popularity of nail art may be related to peer approval. This means that some women may elect to wear nail art in order to achieve the high of receiving ‘likes’ or attention from their peers.

Social media use is becoming a part of daily life for people all over the world. Nail art has a large presence on various social media platforms; since young people are frequent users of social media, it is possible that they will at some point see a hand donning nail art. Upon seeing this hand, young people may wonder why exactly the fingertips are adorned with designs, symbols, or text. The purpose of this case study was to provide some insight into why women wear nail. Looking at the link between social media and nail art, students in the art education classroom can investigate a form of visual cultural.

Summary

The sources of literature discussed in this chapter are pertinent to the research examining why some women in Austin, Texas wear nail art. The literature review emphasized the importance of visual culture as a curricular approach in the art classroom and how nail art could be incorporated using this paradigm. The section on feminist research described how feminist theory informed this study. Following this, the history

and contemporary views of manicures and nail art are provided to detail why both remain prevalent in society today. Looking at the nail industry provides scope to how lucrative and popular nail care is. The section on body adornment illustrates how nail art falls into that category and how humans have used body adornments like nail art to communicate status, values, or opinions throughout history. Finally, the section on social media relates how nail art is shared through this platform and how it may influence viewers. While all the information in this literature review provides supporting information to this study, this review also shows that there is a lack of research giving women personal voice as to why they wear nail art. The methods used to conduct this research are discussed in Chapter Three and build upon the literature cited in this chapter.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter provides an outline of the research methodology, participants, researcher's position, data collection, and data analysis strategy chosen for this study. First, this chapter explains why a case study is best suited for this research. Next, the sample selection of participants and data collection is described. Following that, the next section discusses my ethical obligations as a researcher. Finally, the data analysis is described, detailing content analysis, coding, and inductively finding emerging themes from the data to better understand the results from this study.

Research Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative research approach, specifically a descriptive case study methodology, to examine the research question: why do women wear nail art? Creswell (2009) notes that qualitative research is an approach “for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). Likewise, Hamburg et al. (2016) describe qualitative methods as being “best used to answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participant” (p. 499). Given these parameters, qualitative research techniques were best suited to gather and understand the perspectives of women who adorn their nails with art because it allowed participants to share their opinions on the focus topic (nail art).

Furthermore, a case study is defined as “an investigative approach used to thoroughly describe complex phenomena, such as events, important issues, or programs, in ways to unearth new and deeper understandings of these phenomena” (Lapan et al., 2012, p. 243). This case study focused on the phenomena of why women wear nail art. As previously stated in the Limitations section in Chapter One, Covid-19 hindered the researcher from finding multiple participants for this case study; thus, only three women from the Austin, Texas area who either wear nail art or are practicing nail artists were interviewed. Interviewing a nail artist and two nail art consumers strengthened this research because it examined both perspectives from a consumer and a producer’s standpoint. This strategy provides a method for systematically studying and describing a phenomenon (in this instance, women who choose to adorn their nails with designs and appliques) within a real-life context (Yin, 2003, p. 14). Case studies are bound by a specific time and place. Since this data was gathered in late 2020/early 2021 from only three participants from ages 23-38, it is bound by these parameters.

Moreover, Lapan and Armfield (2012) state that the purpose of case study research includes “its ability to explain, explore, describe, and compare educational or social programs and to discover and communicate innovative ideas and programs” (p. 246). Case study was best suited to answer the research question because interviewing provides an in-depth focus on the personal experiences, opinions, and stories of the women interviewed. Moreover, this research falls into the category of a descriptive case study. Descriptive case study methods are commonly used in social sciences to produce

meaningful results from a holistic investigation into the complex interactions among organizations and people (Dubé & Paré, 2003). A descriptive case study aims to describe the natural phenomena which occur within the data. The case this study examined was the perceptions of women who wear nail art.

Participants

The sampling strategy for selecting participants for this study is known as convenience sampling. Convenience sampling is defined as “using those individuals, objects or events that are available to the researcher” (Martella et al., 1999, p. 124). This type of sampling is limited, meaning it does not tend to be representative of the population (Martella et al., 1999). Due to Covid-19, many potential participants I reached out to via social media and telephone declined to be interviewed. Thankfully, three participants of varying ages and ethnicities agreed to share their opinions and views for this case study. The first participant is a 26 year old Caucasian female, the second participant is a 38 year old Hispanic female, and the third participant is a 23 year old biracial (Hispanic/black) female. Two participants were located through the internet; I contacted them through their personal websites and Instagram pages. The third participant selected is a graduate from a large Southern university. The participants in this study agreed to be interviewed but do not represent or speak for everyone in the nail art community. For the sake of privacy, participants will be referred to by aliases.

Participant #1: Tessa

Tessa is a single 26-year-old white woman hailing from Nashville, Tennessee. Tessa began wearing and painting nail art herself as a young girl. Her love of nail art followed her into adulthood; she became a licensed nail technician before enrolling in university. Tessa majored in business and art with the ultimate goal to become a nail salon owner focusing specifically on nail art. However, she was discouraged from the artform by her professors at Eckerd who claimed that nail art was a frivolous endeavor and did not constitute as “real art.” This experience with her college professors upset Tessa and ultimately caused her to quit being a nail artist. In fact, Tessa changed her main creative medium from nail art to embroidery because of her studio art professor’s influence. Though she stills enjoys wearing nail art and keeping up-to-date on trends, Tessa now dedicates her time managing an online store where she sells her custom embroidery patches.

Participant #2: Meg

Meg is a married 38-year-old Hispanic female that was raised in Houston, Texas. Before she became a licensed nail technician and cartoonist, Meg spent two years in the Bronx as a history teacher in public schools. When she returned to Texas, Meg settled in Austin and initially tried finding work as an educator. However, jobs were scarce and Meg eventually admitted to herself that teaching was not her passion. She then became a licensed nail technician and devoted herself to nail art, honing her craft until she made a name for herself within the local nail art community. Meg hosts workshops and

professional training seminars on nail art in person and online; additionally, Meg owns her own salon space in Austin. Meg views nails as if they are cartoon comic blocks; she prides herself on her ability to create images even on the tiniest, shortest nails. However, Meg has stopped seeing clients in her salon and attending in-person workshops since March 2020 due to Covid-19. Meg has Crohn's disease and is immunosuppressed; she also recently gave birth to a baby boy. Due to these reasons, as of spring 2021, she is no longer seeing clients, though she has begun to host online workshops and hopes to reopen her salon doors as soon as possible.

Participant #3: Ava

Ava is a biracial (Hispanic/black) 23 years old woman. Originally from California, Ava is a graduate student seeking a degree from a large Southern university. Ava states that she always enjoyed wearing nail art and looking at different styles of design. It was not until the mandatory quarantine due to Covid-19 that Ava began painting nail art on her own nails. The forced time indoor gave her time to experiment and refine her skills, using online platforms such as Pinterest to gather ideas and inspiration. Ava especially expressed her belief that nail art can be used to make political statements; she cited nail art promoting the Black Lives Matter movement as her favorite example.

The Researcher

In order to assure quality and rigor in this type of research, it is important to be open about my research practices by addressing any potential biases I may have. As the researcher, it is necessary to give a brief description of myself and my background. I grew up in and around Mobile, Alabama. I am a single, 26 years old white woman. I was raised by a single mother and have two older brothers; much of my childhood was spent deriding anything feminine, desperately trying to be “boyish” so I would be included in video game tournaments and wrestling matches in the living room with my brothers. It was not until I reached puberty that I began to feel the pressures to conform to traditional gender presentations. While I refused to wear makeup and scoffed at dresses, I was fascinated by nail art. My mother, overjoyed that I was finally ditching my “tom boy” persona, bought me bottles of any sparkly or neon nail polish I wanted. At last, her daughter was finally doing something other girls liked to do!

As previously mentioned, I liked to mix nail polish colors together and create tiny designs. I am creative by nature and have always loved to paint. Perhaps my fascination with nail art is because nails are simply another surface for me to decorate, much like paper or canvas. Regardless of the reason, nail art it was my first foray into the world of traditional femininity, and I remain fascinated with the colorful designs women display on their hands. This study is to better understand why other women chose to wear nail art, though I will openly admit to being an avid nail art fan/connoisseur myself, which will likely result in a bias the artform. However, being familiar with nail art and the nail art

community is also advantageous because I am aware of terms, styles, and trends as they emerge.

Data Collection

The main tool for data collection for this study was semi-structured interviews.

Magaldi and Berler (2020) define semi-structured interviews as follows:

The semi-structured interview is an exploratory interview used most often in the social sciences for qualitative research purposes or to gather clinical data. While it generally follows a guide or protocol that is devised prior to the interview and is focused on a core topic to provide a general structure, the semi-structured interview also allows for discovery, with space to follow topical trajectories as the conversation unfolds. (Magaldi & Berler, p. 161).

An interview is a common data collection tool used in qualitative research to gain a better understanding of the investigated phenomenon. Interviews exist on a spectrum; on one end, they can be highly standardized and structured, while on the other end they can be freely unstructured. Standardized interviews require participants to respond to the same questions from a structured interview protocol. Unstructured interviews evolve based on participants' responses; because of this, questions are not standardized and responses will differ. Semi-structured interviews fall in the middle on this spectrum. Semi-structured interviews allow conversation to freely flow while still bound by guidelines. Questions are asked in a way that allows for an assortment of responses but keeps the focus on a specific topic (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). Since gaining the perspectives of three women who wear and create nail art was purpose of this study,

semi-structured interviews were the best suited for gathering the data. The interviews for this study were semi-structured which allowed me to ask follow-up questions as needed for clarification.

Additionally, the goal of semi-structured interviews is to create a safe space in which the participant feels comfortable to reflect upon and share their personal experiences (Fylan, 2005). Due to Covid-19 and health concerns, the participants for this study were comfortable answering questions via Zoom or over the telephone. Zoom is a digital platform that allows users to connect through quality video. Users can screen-share, record meetings, and add closed captioning to their recordings. Two participants for this study used the screen-share application to show me their nail art or favorite nail artists. This proved to be beneficial; while I still had to Google and search some of the products, trends, and nail artists mentioned in these semi-structured interviews, the screen-share option allowed me to see what styles of nail art each participant favored or disliked in real-time. One participant spoke to me over the phone and was recorded via Rev, an audio-recording application that records and provides transcriptions of spoken conversations upon ending the phone call.

The semi-structured interviews with each participant were audio recorded and transcribed. This mode of interviewing allows the interviewer to respond with follow-up questions. This allowed for participants to explain what they meant fully and allowed me to better understand their perspectives.

Data Analysis

As Creswell (2009) points out, qualitative research tends to be driven by inductive research strategies to explore data regarding a phenomenon rather than adhering to testing pre-existing hypothesis. In this case study, inductive analysis was used to interpret the semi-structured interviews. Inductive research looks for patterns in order to create codes drawn from the data rather than using preexisting coding systems like deductive analysis. The process of inductive analysis involves both developing “a set of analytic categories” relevant to the aspects of the data as well as assigning the “particular items of data to those categories” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, pp. 208-209).

Before I began coding or looking for patterns, I first created wordclouds (www.wordclouds.com) so that I could have a visual representation of the data. I created individual wordclouds for each participant’s responses to the interview questions so I could visually see and compare which words or phrases most often used. Wordcloud generators break bodies of text down to component words and count how frequently these words appear. The frequency in which each word appears is reflected in the cloud: the more frequently a word appears, the larger the word is. Alida (2012) writes that wordclouds “reveal the essentials” and that “the creation of a word-cloud and the observation of one help to provide an overall sense of the text” (<https://www.alida.com/>). Data visualization, according to Analytiks, “makes the data more natural for the human mind to comprehend and therefore makes it easier to identify trends, patterns, and outliers within large data sets” (Analytiks, 2020, para. 1).

personal, and creative), and social media. Participants expressed that nail art, specifically the application, can be a bonding experience. Touching one another's hands, chatting for an hour or longer in a private space, the application of nail art allows many women the opportunity to create interpersonal relationships. Nail art, according to participants, also allowed themselves and clients to express numerous facets about themselves through creative designs. Social media was a big theme, serving as a catalyst for nail art trends and sharing the medium between enthusiasts

Conclusion

This chapter described how the case study methodology was best suited for my research. The participants, under the aliases of Tessa, Meg and Ava, were introduced. The selection criteria of these participants was explained, along with how semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from them. For data analysis, I explained how I utilized inductive coding to find emergent themes and why I chose to incorporate data visualization via wordclouds. In the following chapters, I provide the results of this study.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter discusses findings from the data collected for this case study. The first section describes a brief overview of three emergent themes which are expression, bonding, and social media. These three themes emerged after analyzing the interview transcriptions; excerpts of what participants said support the above themes I deemed most pertinent for this study. The results presented in this chapter answer the central research question: What motivates some millennial women in Austin, Texas to create and consume nail art?

Themes

This section presents three themes which emerged through inductive analysis. The themes are the following:

1. Expression
2. Bonding
3. Social Media

Theme #1: Expression

Expression is the process in which a person relates their thoughts, feelings, and ideas. According to Kim and Ko (2007), expression is one of the most highly-regarded and venerated values in Western civilization due to the near-deification of “the individual” in our society. A commonality among all participants in this study was that nail art serves as a prime conduit for expression, both creative and political. Brown and Bousalis (2017) state that, “The creative act also associated with self-identification, being completely involved in, and with, the work that an individual creates. During the process,

the creative work becomes an extension of the self who is completely immersed in the action” (p. 49). Based upon this, nail art is a way for women to express themselves which in turn reflects their individuality. In the following sections, participants elucidate their reasonings for nail art being an expressive medium.

Creative Expression

As it relates to nail art, creative expression is displayed through designs, images, colors, or text. Meg, the 38-year-old nail artist, states that, “I think it's [nail art] a very creative way to express yourself through a kind of effervescent art form. Kind of a way to do a very individualized fashion” (personal communication, December 1, 2020). In a similar vein, Ava, the 23 year-old woman currently attending university, states, “I think it's just a really fun way...to express femininity and just express creativity. I think it just adds a little layer of flare to someone's overall aesthetic” (personal communication, December 15, 2020). To Ava, nail art is a conduit of creative expression, a way to amplify a woman’s chosen aesthetic while to Meg, one of the most appealing things about nail art being a medium for creative expression is the idea that it can quickly be modified. Meg explains, “Gel manicures typically last two to three weeks, so the Meg I am today is not necessarily the Meg I am in three weeks design wise, what I'm feeling, what I want to celebrate, what I want to have on my nails” (personal communication, December 1, 2020). Unlike the permanence of a tattoo that lasts a lifetime, nail art can quickly be erased or tweaked to be a more accurate presentation of the person wearing it. This is important because one’s perceptions, likes, and dislikes can evolve; nail art being impermanent allows one’s fingertips to change and match these fluid constructions. For

Meg, nail art is arguably intrinsically linked to her identity in that it represents facets of herself that morph or change overtime. Roach and Eicher (1979) assert that personal adornment is “a communicative symbol that serves crucial functions within human lives” (p. 20). As a form of personal adornment, nail art communicates one’s creativity.

Nail art also allows women to be expressive. Tessa, the 26-year-old graduate from Eckerd College, states, “Nails are a very unique way to express your style... one extra step you can take to show the world who you are” (personal communication, December 8, 2020). The idea of ‘showing the world who you are’ through personal style is something women have done for centuries with personal adornments such as fashion, jewelry, hair styling, as well as nail art. *Psychology Today* states, “Style is a little ode to creativity and novelty...It gives a hint of personality...It is a reflection of your unique complexity as a human being” (2005, para. 3). With nail art encompassing a wide array of styles and designs, these tiny images on fingertips are but one of many ways women can express their style or personality.

Political Expression

Moller (2016) asserts, “Art can be understood as a form of, or contribution to, political discourse; as a descriptive, interpretive, or explicitly critical approximation; or as a vehicle with which to transcend the political” (p. 1). For some participants in this study, nail art can be understood similarly, contributing to political discourse through the images, symbols, and text. A commonality among the participants was the shared belief that nail art could express political or social stances. Ava explains, “I’ve definitely seen people use their nail art as a space for advancing social justice and having BLM, or just

different protest art or certain designs” (personal communication, December 15, 2020). BLM, or Black Lives Matter, is a political and social movement that protests police brutality and racial violence against Black people. The year that this study took place (2020), the BLM movement was highly active, with protests being held nationwide over the unlawful death of George Floyd by law enforcement in Minneapolis. Images of nails decorated with the BLM logo, the raised fist symbolizing Black pride, defiance, and solidarity, as well as nails with peace signs and slogans that read “Don’t shoot!” advertise the wearer’s support of this movement (Figure 11).



Figure 11: Example of BLM nails. (Credit to Britney Byrd-Campbell)

Similarly, Tessa shared that she had, “Seen people use their nails to advertise their political beliefs. Like red, white, and blue donkeys and elephants and someone even painted Bernie Sanders on their thumbnail!” (personal communication, December 8,

2020). For example, the symbol of a donkey or elephant painted red and blue would hint at what political party a woman supported (Figure 12).



Figure 12: Example of political nail art. (Credit to more.com)

The idea that nails can express political beliefs is further supported by the anecdote Meg shared with me. She said:

Although, I would say like, I would draw the line at swastikas, but actually one time I was hired by a film company to do this act. It was an Antifa style. The protagonists was this Antifa person character, and so what we did on her nails, what the director wanted, and it was a male director, and what he wanted was a white nail with black swastikas with red circles crossing them out on all 10 nails (Meg, December 1, 2020).

Here one sees that nail art becomes a marker to define the character in a movie. A swastika crossed out indicates that this character is against Nazism, racism, and fascism. The use of nail art in this context gives the public a glimpse to what this fictional character represents.

Expression, whether it be creative or political, can be presented through nail art according to the participants of this study. The images, text, and designs on nails communicate to viewers what the wearer supports or finds aesthetically pleasing. This mode of expression can be easily altered to match the wearer's current aesthetic, values, or beliefs.

Theme #2: Bonding

The next emergent theme was bonding. Kauth (2020) argues that women have participated in bonding activities since humans lived in hunter-gatherer societies. Women were delegated certain tasks, such as foraging and childrearing, and during this time Kauth (2020) asserts that bonding took place as a matter of circumstance and survival. Women bonded, formed alliances, and supported one another. In contemporary times, women still participate in activities that facilitate bonding. Two of the participants mentioned the idea that women engage with nail art because it inspires intimate connections and bonding with other women. Meg explained: "I sort of picked up nail art just as a for fun thing that my friend and I would do together. We would braid each other's hair at slumber parties and do each other's nails. And we touch and we decorate each other" (personal communication, December 1, 2020).

Gathering together to create and consume nail art serves a social and emotional function. Tessa stated, "I also think it's a way for women to come together, ya know? We [friends] sit around and choose designs, and then we spend time together painting our nails and talking" (personal communication, December 8, 2020). While nail art is a creative and fun activity to do together, it also provides women time to talk in a relaxed

environment. While this activity may seem inconsequential, *Nails* magazine publisher Cyndy Drummey asserted that nail art “is an easy way to find a superficial connection with women you don’t know well, or to cement a familial bond” (Friedman, 2015, para. 6). Nail art, whether an activity conducted with friends or strangers, is a way for women to congregate and practice a shared activity that prompts talking and touching, both of which support the theme of nail art being an activity that prompts bonding.

Physical and emotional health benefits from the physicality of touching while painting nails. Dacher Keltner, the founding director of the Greater Good Science Center and professor of psychology at University of California, Berkeley, says “in recent years, a wave of studies has documented some incredible emotional and physical health benefits that come from touch. This research is suggesting that touch is truly fundamental to human communication, bonding, and health” (Keltner, 2010, para. 3). Holding hands while painting nails is a platonic touch that kindles feelings of bonding. It is also important to note that the touching done while painting nails is often accompanied by talking. The dual process of touching and talking promotes a level of comfort between women and supports the theme that wearing nail art offers women the opportunity to bond.

The physical setting in nail salons can also increase the sense of intimacy and bonding between artist and client. “I book most of my appointments for two hours,” Meg states, “They’re pretty long sessions, which means I’m sitting across from someone, I have a private room so it’s not like a traditional salon setting, and we’re holding hands and it’s a very intimate place” (personal communication, December 1, 2020). In this setting,

Meg is touching and talking with a client for a set amount of time. These one-on-one sessions are private affairs that include collaboration between nail artist and client on design and nail shape. As Meg paints, she and her clients talk for the time remaining. Though every client is different, Meg says that there is a level of trust between she and her clients, and that she aims to create a safe space for them. This kind of atmosphere allows for bonding between the two, as the process itself prompts touch and talking.

Theme #3: Social Media

The last theme that emerged was social media and the key role it plays in women who wear and create nail art. Images of nail art shared on these platforms elicits desire in the viewer; the desire to duplicate the nail art designs from their favorite celebrities, artists, or influencers. Ava discusses how celebrities influence nail art:

I think celebrities definitely influence nail trends when it comes to social media these days. You can think of any celebrity in particular, but I just follow a lot of celebrities and a lot of times, if they're getting all done up for an event, stuff like that and they'll get their nails on as well as their makeup and their hair, they usually tag every person that helped them with that process. Sometimes, I'll click and look at the nail artists and see what else they do. It's just really impressive and cool. (Ava, December 15, 2020).

Much like the influencers on Instagram and Pinterest, celebrities are in essence walking advertisements for nail artists. Like Ava, many women will notice what their favorite celebrities wear on their nails and then begin to research the artist behind the art. This supports the idea that social media may influence these women's decision to wear nail art.

All participants expressed that they keep updated on nail art trends through social media outlets such as Instagram and Pinterest. “Social media and nail art go hand-in-hand to me,” stated Tessa. She continued, stating, “Like, on Pinterest and Twitter nail art is shared constantly, and I think we all pull inspiration from it. It’s a really good way to show off your style and let people know what you can do” (personal communication, December 8, 2020). In this way, social media is serving as source of inspiration for nail artists, as well as a platform to share their work and build their businesses.

Social media is critical to the businesses of nail artists. “Social media is such an incredible way for us not only to show our work and grow our businesses,” argued Meg in a statement nearly verbatim to Tessa’s statement above. “I mean, it’s truly the only way I’ve grown my business, which is pretty amazing since it’s a free platform, but yeah, definitely. It’s also a way that we’ve been able to connect with each other [nail artists] and clients” (personal communication, December 1, 2020). As such, social media allows for nail art connoisseurs to network and discover artists in their area. As a nail artist, Meg stated that she makes a point to keep up to date on nail art trends through social media so she is aware of what her clients will likely request. Meg expressed that she likes to practice popular designs that go viral within the nail art community so her technique will be flawless when a client requests it. Social media thus enables nail artists to build stronger businesses and create better experience for their clients.

Conclusion

This chapter provided results from the three participant interviews. Through this data, I investigated as to why these three participants believe women wear nail art.

During the data analysis, I examined the interview transcripts. Data analysis revealed three themes: expression, bonding, and social media. The themes were discussed in each section and were supported by participant quotes. The final chapter will further discuss the three themes and their meanings, future implications for research, and final thoughts on this study.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This chapter serves to summarize and goes beyond the key findings of this descriptive case study. The guiding research question of the study was: What motivates some millennial women in Austin, Texas to create and consume nail art? In Chapter Four, the results were organized into three themes: expression, bonding, and social media. This chapter expands on these three findings. The next section describes implications for future research. Finally, I explain what I gained from this study as a researcher and why the findings are important for the field of art education.

Expression

From a visual culture standpoint, nail art is a tangible form of expression. Fingernails become tiny billboards that showcase images and text. Examining these images require that viewers consider possible meanings of symbols, colors, and subliminal messages. The participants in this study reported that they believed women wear nail art to express their creativity, political beliefs, and style. Creativity, as described by the participants in the study, is communicated through the designs they wear; nail art can enhance their overall aesthetic or allow them an additional space to decorate themselves. Nail art also serves as a way to express political beliefs per the participants; symbols show if they a Republican or Democrat, while text on their nails can show which social-political movements they support. However, it should be noted that what the wearer might be trying to convey, might or might not be the message that the viewer constructs. Like any form of tangible expression, it can be interpreted

differently depending on the viewer which is why it needs to be added to art curriculum. The different interpretations of nail art are testament to the richness and complexity of the artform as a form of visual culture.

Furthermore, it is important that women retain the ability to express themselves with nail art because so often there are restrictions that prevent women to express themselves with their clothing, hair, makeup, or nails. These restrictions are often unfairly gendered, with men not being upheld to the same standards as women. Aghasaleh (2018) asserts that many school dress codes are a form of oppression, disproportionately targeting females. This practice “means some bodies are more privileged over the other” (p. 102). This is problematic because the female body becomes something that is heavily monitored and controlled. This is another topic of conversation that can be conducted in the art education class using nail art as a form of visual culture.

Bonding

Participants in this study explained that nail art facilitated bonding through conversation and physicality. Nail art oftentimes involves women gathering at a salon or home, getting their nails done together. Painting nails thus allows women time to touch and talk to one another for an uninterrupted amount of time, both of which are important in the facilitation of bonding.

First, dialogue between people is key in creating and cultivating bonds. While painting nail art, participants in this study related that they gained insight about what was going on in their friends or clients’ lives; such insight included stories about their jobs,

updates on family, or even romantic endeavors. Because the application of nail art can last up to an hour, this means that women have an allotted time to talk to one another with few interruptions. Morgan Kelly (2015) reports that Asif Ghazanfar, a professor of psychology at the Princeton Neuroscience Institute, states that “research suggests that talking, even just casually, is an evolutionary tool for establishing closeness...talking is a social lubricant, not necessarily done to convey information, but to establish familiarity” (para. 8). Nail art is an activity that typically involves talking which may facilitate bonding.

Next, if we look at the mental health benefits of touching, nail art provides an opportunity for such healing to take effect. Crevling (2020) writes, “In addition to lowering cortisol and boosting serotonin, touch can also increase the hormone known as oxytocin, or the love hormone. It’s a bonding hormone — it has to do with our sense of trust and attachment” (para. 10). Since nail art involves touching for a set amount of time (typically an hour or more), it may serve to lower stress levels of nail art wearers and be why they adorn their nails in the first place.

During the Covid-19 epidemic, with many salons closing their doors and people social distancing, women have had to paint their nails at home or not at all. The absence of going to the nail salon or a friend’s house have been noted by one participant in this study; Tessa laments, “I just miss being with my girls. Nail art was “our thing”, ya know?” (personal communication, December 8, 2020). While Tessa also acknowledges that there are outlets such as Zoom and FaceTime where she and her friends could

theoretically do their nails and talk, the barrier of a screen does not allow for physical touch.

As of June 2021, salons are slowly re-opening their doors but with increased health restrictions in place. These restrictions include mandatory masks, enforced social distancing, and plexiglass between nail artist and client at all times. The intimate nature of nail art is somewhat lost because of these barriers set in place. However, many salons are still not open at all despite these measures. As of June 2021, Meg is still not accepting clients and her independent studio remains closed to the public. For Meg's regular clients, they are still unable to reclaim that intimacy they once shared with her. In that regard, along with Tessa's assertion that she misses painting nail art with friends, it shows that the absence of nail art as a shared activity is an outlet for bonding with female friends is lost and sorely missed.

Social Media

The presence of social media is undeniable in the popularity of nail art and the reason why so many women elect to wear it. All participants mentioned that they frequent nail art groups on social media. Whether to keep tabs on trends, to learn how to replicate designs, or to simply showcase their own work, social media proved to be the epicenter of all these activities. While the participants in this study view nail art is a form of expression and an intimate activity, one has to wonder if the main factor in the proliferation of nail art is the influence of social media. According to *Scientific American*, "Users may feel pressured...to present what they perceive is their ideal self and

maximize their attractiveness...” (D’Costa, 2014, para. 14). Social media has created an environment where users feel pressured to follow trends that ostensibly make them more attractive. The beauty industry is pervasive and nail art is but a tiny slice of the industry. As images shared on social media are passed along from one user to the next, and as influencers and celebrities spearhead trends, the invested public take note and seek to replicate what they see. This may seem at odds with nail art being a creative endeavor if women are simply just copying what is popular, however, it can be argued that copying an image or design is still being creative.

Without the popularity of nail art on these platforms, one must wonder if the appeal of the medium would be as prevalent in society. While nail art magazines have been in circulation since the 1980s in the United States, the widespread appeal of nail art did not hit the mainstream until after the advent of social media platforms. Instagram and Pinterest are home to ‘influencers’, individuals who have a dedicated social following and are viewed as experts within their niche. In the case of nail art, influencers who wear certain designs spearhead trends that their followers quickly emulate or adopt for themselves.

The article entitled “The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families” states that social media robs “self-regulation” and makes most susceptible “to peer pressure” (O’Keefe, Schurgin, &, Clarke-Pearson, 2011). It is possible that women are influenced to wear nail art via social media. In this sense, women wear nail art because they want to “fit in” and be part of the growing trend. Whether women use nail

art for expression or as a bonding activity becomes debatable if women are only donning nail art under the influence of social media.

Recommendations for Future Research

Although the results from this study provide information as to why a particular sampling of women wear nail art, more research should be done to gather additional data. Boddy (2016) asserts, “Qualitative research which is oriented towards positivism, will require larger samples than in-depth qualitative research does, so that a representative picture of the whole population under review can be gained” (p. 426). The analysis done in this study was based on a small sample size meaning that it does not provide a representative picture of a large population. This study drew from a small sample size due to COVID-19 health restrictions in place during the data gathering phase of this study. Thus, this study is not able to provide a representative picture of a large population. To continue the research, it would be ideal to do this study on a larger scale with more interviews from women of different ages, races, and ethnicities from other states in order to have a more holistic understanding of the nail art phenomena. Conducting a larger study with a larger sample of women could shed light on factors that did not appear in this study and contribute greater understanding to nail art in these different communities.

This study did not examine other factors that may influence women to wear nail art, such as nail art as a form of self-care, wearing nail art to flaunt economic status, or wearing nail art for special occasions like holidays or weddings. These factors were not

mentioned by the three participants in this study, so they were not examined in this study. However, it is important to mention that these factors exist and should be investigated in future research.

Additional studies on why transgender women and drag queens wear nail art would also add another level to the research. Suen et. al (2020) contend, “Sexual and gender minority (SGM) people—including members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities—are understudied and underrepresented in research. Current sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) questions do not sufficiently engage SGM people” (p. 2301). The data from this marginalized demographic would shed further insight on who wears nail art and why. This data is important because nail art is currently policed by some schools in the United States. In Abilene, Texas, an openly gay teenage boy received in-school suspension for wearing nail polish, something his female classmates were freely allowed to do (Wilde, 2021). This unfairly gendered punishment brings to light sexist double standards that still exist, as well as the power of nail polish to signal gender norms and identity. Data that illuminates why nail art is utilized by the LGBTQ+ community may help to promote gender-neutral dress codes that are fair for every student, regardless of gender or sexuality.

Another facet to this research could be to examine at female entrepreneurs in the nail industry. In this study, one of the participants was a practicing nail artist with her own salon space. Meg, the salon owner, mentioned how her business allowed her the opportunity to be creative and pursue a line of work she found fulfilling while also being

her own boss. Like Mary Cobb mentioned in the Literature Review, the nail industry provides women a level of agency in their careers. Looking at the perspectives of the women who work in the industry juxtaposed against the patrons of nail services would provide the research another enriching layer.

Finally, connecting this topic to the K-12 art classroom would help students because it would allow them to examine an example of visual culture. This topic is relevant to the K-12 because art educators could explore what kind of nail art trends their students are familiar with. Why do they think women wear nail art? What are common images do they see on nails? Student interactions with visual culture through the form of nail art would provide further insight into this research

Final Thoughts

When I first began this research journey, I was not sure what I would find. I knew why I personally enjoyed nail art, but never stopped to consider why others might enjoy it. Delving deeper into the data revealed that for my participants nail art goes beyond a love of design or trend. Analyzing each participant's interview has shed light that there are multiple reasons why women wear nail art. Participants expressed that nail art was expression at the fingertips; a bonding activity between friends or clients; an art form heavily influenced and celebrated on social media. I believe that my own familiarity with nail art allowed me to understand the participants' opinions. I was not skeptical of their assertions or out to prove them wrong. As someone who has long loved nail art, I appreciated their differing opinions and even gained a better understanding of nail art.

With that being said, this study made me aware of the lack of attention nail art gets within the art education field. Though beyond the scope of this study, I visualize numerous lesson plans where educators use nail art for lesson plans on gender and identity for older students. For younger students, the patterns of different nail art could be divided by color or design, and they could create their own nail art on a small surface. Art educators often tell students to “fill the page” on large sheets of paper; this lesson would require them to fill a small space with as much detail as possible. This study was enlightening to the fact that nail art is a largely untapped resource for art educators, and I hope this research will inspire educators to include nail art within their curriculums.

Appendix

Interview Questions

What is your name?

Would you like to be reported under an alias or is using your given name acceptable?

Where are you from?

How do you define nail art?

When did you start painting your nails with designs?

Would you say there is a difference between a nail artist and a manicurist? If so, what are some of the differences?

Do you follow any nail artists on social media? If so, who are your favorites and why?

Are there specific nail art trends you follow?

Is there a nail art trend you wish would go away?

To what degree do celebrities influence nail art trends? Which celebrities stand out to you as nail art influencers?

What are your favorite nail polish brands and why?

Where do you find inspiration for your nail art?

Why do you think women choose to wear nail art?

What messages do you think nail art sends to people?

Do you think nail art should be censored at all?

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